

JFK MADE HISTORY IN 1960

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By James A. Haught

May 10 brings the 50th anniversary of a West Virginia event that changed American history. The Mountain State's legendary 1960 primary election clinched the Democratic presidential nomination for John F. Kennedy and carried him into the White House.

To mark the golden anniversary, aging veterans of that clash will hold an all-day Charleston program, mostly at the Culture Center. I'm to be among panelists. Another all-day ceremony is set for Logan, which was a 1960 political battleground.

Most historians assert that the famed West Virginia primary was a cultural landmark because it showed that mountain Protestants weren't too prejudiced to vote for a Roman Catholic, and thus America gained its first Catholic president. That's true, of course.

Actually, I don't remember much anti-Catholic hostility among Kanawha Valley folks during the historic campaign. The worst prejudice came in vicious pamphlets sent into the state by national demagogues like evangelist Carl McIntire, a big Catholic-hater in those days.

Some observers think Kennedy deliberately spotlighted the religious issue, to nudge West Virginians to show they weren't prejudiced by supporting him. It conveyed an insidious message: Anyone backing his challenger, Hubert Humphrey, did so out of bigotry.

In the end, poor Humphrey was outclassed, outgunned, outspent, outmaneuvered -- and lost the Mountain State so badly that he quit the presidential race. Kennedy seized the Democratic nomination and narrowly defeated Republican Richard Nixon for the presidency.

Personally, my foremost memory of those times involves disgusting corruption that tainted West Virginia politics back then, chiefly in southern coal counties.

Jack Kennedy hardly needed help from political crooks. He was an ideal candidate: handsome, youthful, witty, popular, a war hero with a gorgeous wife and a rich father who bankrolled him lavishly. His wealthy and glamorous relatives campaigned with him, covering West Virginia like an exuberant team. Kennedy's sparkling charisma made Democratic rival Humphrey seem drab. Humphrey was mostly alone, except for his wife.

JFK probably could have won the West Virginia showdown, purely on his personal appeal. But plenty of sleaze was committed on his behalf. Large bags of

Kennedy cash were funneled to scummy courthouse kingpins in the coalfields, who listed Kennedy atop their "slates" of chosen candidates and used his father's money to buy votes. Here's the record:

On the day after the 1960 primary, the Logan Banner said the election was a spree of "flagrant vote-buying, whiskey flowing like water, and coercion of voters.... You name it and we just about had it."

Logan political boss Raymond Chafin wrote in his autobiography, "Just Good Politics," that Humphrey agents first gave him \$2,500 for slate access -- but Kennedy agents offered more. When they asked how much money would be required, Chafin told them "about 35," meaning \$3,500. But the JFK agents misunderstood and sent him two suitcases containing \$35,000. Chafin was flabbergasted. His sidekick, Bus Perry, panicked and blurted: "I've already been in the penitentiary once. I'm not going back."

Chafin said he calmed Perry and phoned Kennedy headquarters to report the error, but was told to put the cash to good use. He put it to bad use.

Another Logan boss, Claude "Big Daddy" Ellis, claimed that the Kennedy camp sent him more than \$50,000, which went for "sawbucks and half-pints," the standard payoff to voters who let precinct workers "assist" them in choosing the designated slate. Ellis quipped that JFK didn't "buy West Virginia; he just rented it for a day."

Various national newspapers and magazines wrote about West Virginia's corruption in 1960. Life magazine described coal-county "lever brothers" (a takeoff on Lever Brothers soap products), dishonest precinct workers who flipped levers of old-style voting machines for bribed voters.

"Votes are bought in every West Virginia election," former legislator Charlie Peters told USA Today. As Kennedy's Kanawha County chairman in 1960, he said Election Day payola was "like the old moonshining tradition." Peters, who later was a Peace Corps chief and founded Washington Monthly magazine, is scheduled to appear in the all-day May 10 anniversary. Recently, Peters wrote that corruption reports about that era have been overblown.

In his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, "The Making of the President, 1960," Theodore White called Mountain State politics "the most squalid, corrupt and despicable" in America. "Politics in West Virginia involves money -- hot money, under-the-table money, open money."

Kennedy's brother-in-law, Sargent Shriver, later head of the Peace Corps, recalled sarcastically: "We played the West Virginia game by the West Virginia rules." All these allegations were compiled by state Supreme Court law clerk Allen Loughry in his 2006 book, "Don't Buy Another Vote. I Won't Pay for a Landslide." The title refers to a joke by JFK, supposedly quoting a note from his father during the Mountain State primary.

Even worse, the Mafia reportedly joined the campaign. Pulitzer Prize-winner Seymour Hersh -- who spoke in Charleston in 2005 at the Gazette-WVU Festival of Ideas -- wrote a book titled "The Dark Side of Camelot" contending that JFK's father

got rich from bootlegging in the Depression, which gave him mob connections. Hersh said the father paid mob leaders to help his son in West Virginia, mostly in the Northern Panhandle and with unions like the Teamsters, then Mafia-dominated.

Hersh alleged that Judith Exner, one of JFK's many lovers, also was a girlfriend of Chicago crime boss Sam Giancana. The woman claimed that Kennedy gave her bags of money to carry to Giancana during the West Virginia struggle. Former Gazette Editor Don Marsh scoffed at the Hersh allegation.

In his book about West Virginia politics, "Afflict the Comfortable," former Gazette writer Thomas Stafford said ex-editor Harry Hoffmann, a fellow Catholic, refused to believe that Kennedy's forces bought the 1960 primary. However, Stafford wrote that the newspaper's late publisher, W.E. "Ned" Chilton III, "settled the issue in his own blunt fashion" by declaring that Kennedy "bought a landslide, not an election."

At the peak of the campaign, Chilton helped lead a televised Kennedy-Humphrey debate, a forerunner of such face-offs that later become standard in elections.

I wasn't a political writer in 1960, so I covered fringe events -- such as TV newsman David Brinkley visiting a dilapidated Wayne County bridge to spotlight poverty and decrepitude in the hills. I attended a Wayne stop in which gubernatorial candidate Wally Barron delivered a rouser speech about flag-saluting. He spoke from the back of a flatbed truck whose mudflaps said "Jesus Saves." Barron was strong for patriotism and religion, until he and most of his Statehouse chiefs went to prison.

One news photo from the campaign featured JFK petting my bandaged dog. My late wife had taken the injured pooch to a roadside campaign stop, and Kennedy paused to comfort the mutt, while cameramen snapped.

Poverty was horrendous in West Virginia in 1960, because coal mechanization in the 1950s had wiped out tens of thousands of miner jobs. The hardship made a gripping impression on JFK. After entering the White House, he showered help on the region through public works projects, food stamps, job training, Appalachian Corridor construction -- and even providing electricity to remote sectors.

The world of 1960 no longer exists. Blatant vote-buying in southern coal counties is diminished today, thanks to many federal busts and passage of election cleanup laws. Political kingpins of the bad old days have faded and died.

But history is eternally fascinating. May 10 will be a special time to look back on the day when West Virginia changed America's destiny.

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